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Strong Bay presence at Earth Summit
Challenge to U.S. contingent even greater than 10 years ago

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A decade ago, when world leaders gathered in Rio de Janeiro for the first Earth Summit, they issued a dramatic call to save the planet from scourges such as deforestation and global warming. The rhetoric was grand, major commitments were made.

On Monday, when presidents and prime ministers meet in Johannesburg for the second Earth Summit, they will be faced with the fact that few of those commitments have been met. President Bush won't be there to hear the concerns, or the reasons advanced by many critics for the lack of progress: American foot-dragging, especially on the issue of global climate change.

"This administration proposes nothing new to solve the problem or even jump- start American leadership in the dialogue (over climate change)," said Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., a sentiment that is likely to be expressed repeatedly by critics during the summit.

Some of the loudest voices will come from Bay Area environmental activists, scores of whom are attending as delegates to the U.N.-sponsored World Summit on Sustainable Development. Among them are members of the Sierra Club, Rainforest Action Network, Global Exchange, inner-city activist groups such as Communities for a Better Environment and Urban Habitat Program, and the International Forum on Globalization, a think tank that ran a preparatory conference for activists in Johannesburg last week.

Bay Area groups "have played a critically important role since Rio," says Richard Norgaard, a professor of resource economics at UC Berkeley and an adviser to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Because of their work, certainly, we have a much better concept of global environmental problems."

But this year, they face a decidedly uphill struggle.

Despite the landmark Rio summit's call for binding treaties on such issues as global warming, the U.S. administration has strenuously objected to the subsequent accords. It pulled the United States out of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, which would have established binding limitations on carbon emissions and blocked international adoption of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which aims at establishing safeguards on the import and export of genetically modified food.

European nations and environmentalists wanted to discuss these protocols in Johannesburg, but the subjects were stricken from the agenda after the United States threatened to boycott the summit altogether.

However, the Bush administration is not going to the summit empty-handed. A delegation led by Secretary of State Colin Powell will offer a $4.5 billion spending plan to help African nations combat infectious diseases, including HIV, to promote safer drinking water and to help African farmers.

While issues such as disease and hunger will be major agenda items at the summit, critics charge that the administration's programs are largely a rehash of earlier ones and that they do little to address environmental concerns.

Earlier this month, 38 members of the House -- including Rep. George Miller,

D-Martinez, who is attending the summit; House Minority Whip Nancy Pelosi, D- San Francisco; and fellow Bay Area Democrats Anna Eshoo of Palo Alto, Barbara Lee of Oakland and Mike Honda of San Jose -- sent a letter to Bush saying: "We are particularly troubled that the U.S. negotiating position appears to mark a retreat from key principles that former President Bush agreed to in Rio."

Bay Area organizations say they will focus on two key issues in Johannesburg:

-- Globalization versus environmental accords.

Provisions of the Kyoto Protocol, the Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Basel Convention on Hazardous Waste have been threatened with challenges from the World Trade Organization on the grounds that opting for cleaner automobiles, for example, allows nations to "discriminate" against imported products that do not meet the conventions' standards.

Because the WTO's tribunals can levy trade sanctions worth billions of dollars, while the environmental pacts have no punitive teeth, the former could simply override the latter.

At the WTO summit in Qatar in November, the 142 member nations agreed to let the WTO itself resolve jurisdictional disputes with global environmental treaties. Activists are crying foul, saying U.N.-mediated negotiations are required.

The Qatar summit "should not be read as simply a smoking gun, but a declaration of war," said Victor Menotti, environmental director of the International Forum on Globalization, based in San Francisco. "The Johannesburg process will be a critical vehicle to challenge the WTO's attempt at usurping global governance."

Menotti and his allies are likely to lose the fight. Only the "Group of 77" bloc of developing nations are supporting their position, and even that support is weak. Instead, many poor agricultural nations appear more interested in gaining a piece of the free-trade pie. These nations are pleading that rich countries end their farm subsidies and quotas and reduce tariffs further -- demands inimical to environmental groups that oppose free trade and favor farm subsidies.

-- Pollution and the private sector.

The Bush administration is touting voluntary public-private partnerships to help foster improved energy use and pollution reduction. Advocacy groups call it "Enron environmentalism" and say it is a subterfuge for privatizing government programs.

"The idea that voluntary actions by global corporations will protect the world's citizens from pollution, destruction of their communities and natural resources is pure fiction," said Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club.

But the United Nations supports the idea, seeing it as a way of getting corporations to pitch in while

most governments are cutting their domestic and foreign environmental spending. Here, too, the environmentalists' concerns are likely to fall on deaf ears in Johannesburg.

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